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WASHINGTON | James Reston

Reflections on Terror

WASHINGTON

Something useful may come out of the recent acts of terror in the world after all. For they are forcing officials to recognize that many of the rules and customs, privileges and immunities of old-time diplomacy are now seriously out of date.

How United States embassies abroad are built and staffed, for example, illustrates the point. Most of them were built for show and not for security. Many of them are overstaffed and headed by overstuffed political appointees who know little about the history, culture, or languages of the nations they are supposed to understand.

Secretary of State Shultz is trying to appoint professional instead of political ambassadors and to get a few billions out of the Congress to secure the embassies, but even if he makes it, he'll still have some other problems.

For in the terror zones of world affairs, even if embassies and ambassadors are made more secure, the foreign service officers and their families who live and work there are at risk.

Things have calmed down a bit in recent days, but for minor embassy officials, living in insecure houses and getting their children safely to school and back again is a constant worry.

It's a special problem for the wives of foreign service officers living in these diplomatic war zones. They rebelled long ago against being the unpaid servants of their Government and their husbands.

But this generation of United States diplomatic wives is better educated and less subservient than any before. They have professions of their own, and wonder why they have to give them up, and follow their guys, even if they love them, into capitals where they can't practice their professions, or even be sure about the education and security of their kids.

No doubt George Shultz has thought about this, and if he hasn't you can be sure his wife will remind him.

In all embassies, including foreign embassies in the United States, many of the rules go back to the Congress of Vienna in 1815 and before. Then, as now, embassies were regarded as part of national soil, a private preserve for communication between ambassadors and their governments at home, protected by "diplomatic immunity" for the conduct of the legitimate and necessary business of composing the inevitable differences between nations.

But that's not the way it has been working lately. The principle of "diplomatic immunity," for example, has been used by some outlaw nations to protect people who commit crimes of violence — as when the London police were fired upon from the Libyan Embassy, and the culprits were given safe passage home.

Diplomacy may need new rules

Day by day, official messengers travel from one capital to another, with their diplomatic pouches at their feet, guaranteed freedom from inspection by customs officers when they arrive. But these days the pouches from some countries may contain, not proposals for peace but plans and even instruments of terror.

Under the old rules, still in existence, the Soviet Union, for example, or Libya, or Syria, could send as many "diplomats" as they liked to foreign capitals or to the United Nations, calling them "journalists" or "students" or cultural professors, though many of them were nothing more than cops, checking on one another, or spies.

In fairness, it has to be said that the United States and the other Western nations have been playing the same game, though not to the same extent, but still corrupting the diplomatic process through the C.I.A. with fake "newspaper reporters" and wandering "professors."

Some things are being done about all this but not to great effect. The U.S. is trying to kick out some of the Soviet cops from the United Nations, and every day or so the British or French or Spaniards expel some Libyan or Syrian diplomatic thugs, but that doesn't really deal with the problem.

It was a British Ambassador, Sir Henry Wotton, who expressed as a scribbled joke that "an ambassador is an honest man who is sent abroad to lie for his country." His sovereign, James I, fired him for his indiscretion.

But in some parts of the world, an ambassador is sent abroad to murder for his country, and when he is found out, is merely expelled and then honored as a hero when he gets home.

What can be done about all this is hard to tell. There has to be privacy and some kind of immunity for civilized embassies and their servants, but not immunity for murder or parking their cars in the middle of the streets.

Maybe we need to reappraise the diplomatic rules of the Congress of Vienna: 1815 was a long time ago. And the world is full of experienced and retired diplomats who might like to go back to Vienna and try to bring them up to date. □